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ABSTRACT

The quality of undergraduate education is presented as the key issue confronting colleges and universities nationwide, and it is noted that college faculty can do much to enhance the curriculum. It is up to them to see that the curriculum accomplishes the educational purpose it espouses and that it maintains integrity and coherence. However, when in school, doctoral students are often told by senior faculty members to concentrate on research and stay away from committees. Many advanced students graduate with no understanding of the faculty senate or curricular matters, and never have to deal with ethical issues or the obligations of citizenship in a democracy. The 1960s left a mixed legacy, and students became increasingly unprepared for college level work. The business community complained that many college graduates lacked even minimum qualifications required in the first job. In the past several years, national reports have harshly criticized higher education and student assessment has begun to sweep the country in the name of accountability. The political pressure for student assessment has grown out of discontent with today's college graduates. The curriculum for the 21st century should be more than the confluence of student preference, market fashion, and departmental rivalries. There must be a strong leadership from the president and his top aides. Objectives that could be woven into the modern curriculum include: cultivating writing, reading, speaking, and listening; teaching the management of numerical data; and cultivating values. (SM)

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Invitational Talk
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
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Reform and Renewal of Undergraduate Education

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I welcome the opportunity to share with you my concern about the quality of undergraduate education. It is **the** key issue confronting our colleges and universities around the nation. Recently, I have come to the reluctant conclusion that if we fail at this task, nothing that we do in research or in public service will compensate for failures to prepare our children and our children's children for a difficult, demanding, and dangerous world.

A dozen or so years ago the Carnegie Council described undergraduate education as a "disaster area." The problems the council identified persist today. If you and I are defensive in the face of the barrage of such criticism in recent years this is understandable. As professors we know in our bones that all that truly matters takes place in the classroom and the laboratory. The classroom is our place of secular worship. But it is hardly remote from the outside world — far from it. We teach students as they come to us, not as we wish they were. We confront daily poor preparation, and the student indifference that comes from years of schooling. The interests, the values, the ambitions of our students are not necessarily our values. The student is a consumer and the contemporary university is a giant shopping mall, complete with speciality stores and goodies for all tastes.

In the pursuit of the Holy Grail of Excellence, we know that everything matters — the library matters, student preparation matters, faculty-administration relations matter. The design of the course we teach matters. The individual relationship that you — and the dorm resident advisor, and the counselor — have with the individual student matters. Call it the education of the heart. And the undergraduate curriculum matters greatly.

As faculty, there is **much that you cannot do anything about.** But you can do a lot about that non-mosaic of requirements and electives we call the curriculum. Who owns the curriculum? You do. Who is responsible for seeing that it accomplishes the educational purposes you espouse? You are. Who is responsible for the integrity and coherence of the curriculum? You are — no one else, not the administration, not the politicians at the state capitol. And if the curriculum is badly in need of reform and renewal, who is responsible? You collectively — the faculty as a corporate body. The buck stops with you!

This is a message that most of us are reluctant to accept. We took the long road to the Ph.D. to be a chemist, a physicist, an animal scientist, an English professor. No one told us that we were apprentices in education, that the grand design of curriculum would be part of our responsibility. No one told us that as neophyte faculty we were expected to think seriously about education. Quite the contrary. We were advised by senior faculty to concen-

trate on our research and to stay away from committees — especially that battleground of lost hopes, the curriculum committee.

As a young assistant professor (acting) at Stanford, I was no more aware of the Faculty Senate or curricular matters than I was of the Vatican — both bodies far removed from both interest and responsibility. Much later, as president of Ohio State, I gazed with mingled awe and despair on a catalog offering an incredibly varied intellectual fare — over 7,000 courses. One fine spring day, there being no demonstration that afternoon, I asked to meet with the faculty committee reviewing the "basic educational requirements," presumably the foundation stones of "general education."

I guess that I asked "mean" questions for I was never invited back; later the provost patiently explained that curricular issues were off limits to presidents. Perhaps I would find better use of my time — such as extracting more money from politicians and donors to feed the insatiable hungers of the campus.

The questions I asked then haunt me still. Is it possible that we graduate students with virtually no grasp of science, no grasp of the rule of law in American society, no real familiarity with great works of literature, art, music? Can you really spend four or five years in coursework and never be confronted with ethical issues, never develop a grasp of any of the wrenching problems that afflict our society? Can you really earn the B.A. degree still believing that "one person's opinion is as good as another's?" Or worse still, graduate "with distinction" never having reflected on the obligations of citizenship in a democracy.

In the past decade or so I have worked myself into a fine lather posing questions like that. Today, the questions I and others posed are being asked with increasing urgency by thoughtful Americans in the corridors of power — the corporate boardrooms, the legislative halls, the governor's office.

It is no secret any more. The 1960s left a mixed legacy — some good and some bad. On campus, things unravelled. Requirements eroded, were swept away in the triumph of student choice. In matters of "relevance," the student was deemed to be the final arbiter. We neglected foreign languages and the public schools followed suit. Remedial work became a huge burden as faculty in English and mathematics were condemned to teach poorly prepared students. Students voted with their feet, swamping courses in business administration and computer science. Year after year, declining enrollments decimated the humanities, embittering the faculty.

Our public schools were the first to endure the spotlight of intense scrutiny.

It is intriguing to speculate on how educational reform movements ebb and tide in American life. Those of us in higher education applauded David Gardner's *The Nation at Risk* report with its sweeping indictment of the public schools. If there was a "rising tide of mediocrity," if we were losing our competitive edge in the world economy, if we were swamped with students unprepared for college level work, the blame lay squarely on the public schools. And, well, maybe in part on that all-time favorite target — the colleges of education.

We were slow to realize it, but the discontents with American education embraced higher education as well as the schools. The business community complained that many college graduates lacked even minimum qualifications required in the first job. Recently the nation's governors in a series of powerful reports have demanded that colleges and universities require "minimum competencies," and some states enacted legislation to force the campuses to do just that. As if the great tasks of higher education are to be reduced to the securing of minimum competencies!

Within the academy the stage was set for fresh reform efforts. In the past several years we have witnessed at least a half dozen major national reports harshly critical of higher education. I participated in one such exercise: the drafting of the report of the Association of American Colleges, *Integrity in the College Curriculum*.

That report spoke of the lack of coherence and integrity in the college curriculum, of the "misguided marketplace philosophy which permits students as consumers to indulge virtually free choice among a smorgasbord of courses." "Faculty control over the curriculum," the report noted, "became lodged in departments that developed into adept protectors and advocates of their own interests, at the expense of institutional responsibility and curricular coherence." The basic college degree, we reported, has lost much of its meaning. Speaking directly to faculties everywhere, we were pointedly critical:

> Evidence of decline and devaluation is everywhere.... Electives are being used to fatten major and diminish breadth. It is as if no one cared.... As for what passes as a curriculum, almost anything goes.... The major in most colleges is little more than a gathering of courses taken in one department, lacking structure and depth.

Involvement in Learning, a report commissioned by the National Institute of Education, made a compelling case for deeper involvement by students in the learning process. Higher education was challenged to put assessment of student performance at the heart of the academic enterprise. It will not do

— we were told — to content ourselves with the conventional measures of quality — the library holdings, the reputation of faculty, the physical plant. There are nagging questions: What is the "value-added" by the undergraduate experience, and how is "value-added" to be proven. The thrust of the report was that institutional as well as student performance should be "measurable."

Recently, Alan Bloom's best-seller, *The Closing of the American Mind*, modestly subtitled, *How Higher Education Has Failed Democracy and Impoverished the Lives of Today's Students*, echoed an earlier plea by William Bennett that we "reclaim the legacy" of western civilization in our teaching. Both deplored the moral relativism that has invaded the social sciences and humanities, making issues of right and wrong beyond the reach of serious inquiry. They have a point. However, neither Bennett nor Bloom, both superb gadflys, offer much that is positive. Their significance here lies in the fact that books "trashing" higher education now make the "best-seller lists," witness the "expose" in *Profscams*. A rich vein of discontent is being mined by friendly and not so friendly critics.

Our governors and state legislators are a new breed. They are our very own graduates and they know our pretensions and frailties all too well. Political leaders care little about our ritual worship of "Excellence." They ask that higher education define instructional quality, that it put in place measures of student and institutional performance, that it document the "value-added" by a college education. Virginia is not alone in having the requirement for assessment built into its code. In the name of accountability, student assessment is sweeping the country.

Let's face it. The political pressure for student assessment grows out of discontents with today's college graduates. I never met a governor or legislator who cared a whit about something called a curriculum. They know that this is higher education's business and they know that it has been neglected business.

Had we been serious about requiring more rigorous courses of study, an emphasis on reading and writing and speaking, and higher standards of performance, these notions about "inputs" and "outputs" and "value-added" (language borrowed from factory management) would never have surfaced. But assessment is now with us for good and on campuses everywhere (including your own) faculty are struggling mightily to make sense of it.

There are serious limitations to conventional assessment, and it is essential to speak honestly about them. Assessment could likely become the Saturday night special of higher education — a tool that cannot be disassociated from

its most likely use, that is, testing that relies heavily on quantitative measures. Observe how easy it is to slip from one unexamined premise to another: accountability requires assessment, which in turn requires testing, which requires quantitative results. Obviously what cannot be assessed — that is, measured, is of less importance. Someone has observed, "If we cannot test what we teach, we teach what we can test." As Ken Ashworth, Texas Commissioner of Higher Education, has said, "The competencies of graduates of Fagin's School for Pickpockets would be easy to measure, but it would say nothing about the desirability of what is taught."

The curriculum for the 21st century should be more than the confluence of student preference, market fashion, and departmental rivalries. If it is to have integrity, internal coherence, vitality, relevance (in the best sense of that abused word), there must be strong leadership from the president and his top staff. Only a strong alliance of institutional leadership and faculty leadership can do the job. The faculty alone cannot do the job, and the president alone and unaided cannot do the job. Perhaps we need to be reminded that leaders make a difference. The most insidious threat to our American democracy, and to our colleges and universities, may be the unspoken cynicism, the feeling that nothing much can be done about anything. Only a very rich and a very stable society can afford this indulgence, and American society is no longer either.

There is no all-purpose model curriculum, and no need to invent one. At the level of deans, departmental chairpersons, and curriculum committees it is enough to toughen requirements, to trim electives in the general education listing, and to put together options that have rigor. This much can be done, and in fact is beginning to be done. But we have to disenthrall ourselves of the notion that the reform of the curriculum consists simply of packaging and designing new combinations of courses — mixing here a bit of science, here a bit of art, there a bit of humanities. In a sense, virtually every professor has the key to academic reform within his or her hand. All that is required is creative imagination and commitment.

In our report, *Integrity in the College Curriculum*, we defined objectives that could be woven into the curriculum.

- There is hardly a course that could not deal explicitly with the nature of evidence. What is a fact? How do we know what we know?
- Writing, reading, speaking, listening: These are all art forms that can be cultivated in the classroom.

- The management of numerical data: In a society bamboozled by numbers it ought to be required to teach about the deceptiveness of numbers. One thinks of public opinion polls on sex, faculty morale, and other matters of prurient interest. Did you realize that in Miami, Florida, the average person is born Cuban and dies Jewish?

- Everything has a history, whether in music, art, woodworking, auto mechanics. The opportunities for sneaking up on students and nurturing historical consciousness are manifestly unlimited.

- Science education has been described as "deficient in purpose, scope, and style of teaching." If the conventional divisions of science serve as barriers to the emerging knowledge base (as some argue), then the best minds in science need to rework the instructional modes. At minimum, students need to grasp science for what it is, intellectual adventure of a high order.

- Values — the capacity for informed moral choice — can be cultivated everywhere. Students need to be confronted with the burdens of choice, with what Sartre meant by the phrase "condemned to freedom."

- The language of art, music, drama, dance offers unlimited possibilities, and is largely to be found in courses so described. Their richness is best gained by direct access. And that is true of language and literature and foreign cultures. They are best absorbed by direct immersion in an alien culture. Not necessarily a trip to France. In big-city America we have the treasures of alien cultures only miles away, but light years away in our understanding.

In short, every day in every way there are opportunities for professors to be unabashed role models, to testify by their actions for truth and courage, to curb the easy infection of cynicism.

The deepening fragmentation in our society reinforces the fragmentation within the colleges and the universities. We look in vain for the social glue that holds us together, that makes us more than lonely members of a lonely crowd. We must renew our confidence in the magic of human personality, for ourselves as faculty members and administrators as well as for our students.

Who is in charge? You — the faculty — as individuals and as a corporate body. The university, the state, and the students look to you for leadership — more than you would ever guess.